

# Child protection specialists across Montana have new tool to help make difficult choices

Helena IR

**Holly Michels**  
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Caseworkers in Montana have a new way to discuss and get help on some of the most complex child abuse and neglect cases in the state, as well as get additional training.

The Child and Family Services ECHO project, launched in February, connects medical experts from the University of Montana's Center for Children, Families and Workforce Development, the Billings Clinic and child protective services caseworkers statewide.

The participants come together on a 90-minute call once a month for a training session and to discuss the specifics of a difficult situation from a pool of cases submitted by child protection specialists statewide.

ECHO stands for Extension for Community Healthcare Outcomes.

"There are a lot of professionals giving us a lot of their valued time and input, not only in the medical profession, but you have therapists and you also have the University of Montana, who has been a big contributor to this as well. We're very lucky to have this," said Samantha Kitzenberg, supervisor of the Child and Family Services office in Hardin.

The project is paid for by a Billings Clinic ECHO grant and the UM Center. It does not spend additional health department money, director Sheila Hogan said.

The Child and Family Services Division of the state health department has struggled in recent years as the number of abused or neglected children has increased. Under increasingly high workloads, caseworker turnover has increased.

At one past hearing, the recently departed administrator of the division linked the high number of children in foster care to the high turnover among employees, saying a short tenure leads to less confidence in workers about leaving children in their homes.

The added input and feedback from the ECHO project, announced by Gov. Steve Bullock on Thursday, is intended to help caseworkers get more experience and feedback in the decisions they make, Hogan said.

"Ultimately, the goal is to utilize the group's collective expertise to make meaningful recommendations for caseworkers who work on these very complex cases daily," Hogan said.

On the first 90-minute ECHO call in February, Kitzenberg presented a case from the Hardin office. It involved a child who'd been exposed to extreme trauma in the past and is still dealing with symptoms.

"It's a case we've been struggling with that we just wanted some more direction with," Kitzenberg said. "We thought it was a case that would be beneficial to get feedback from this expert panel."

On the call, caseworkers and others were able to ask questions and provide suggestions as a collaborative team. Kitzenberg had two of her four caseworkers on the call; one is directly involved with the case that was discussed.

"It was very beneficial to her specifically," Kitzenberg said. "We were able to follow up with some of those recommendations right away."

The call also gives caseworkers access to specialists and research that might not be available in some of Montana's more rural communities, Kitzenberg said.

Cases are sent in advance to the "hub," as Billings Clinic's Dr. Mariela Herrera calls it, before the call so members can review the issues and be prepared.

Anything too specific or other identifying factors are left out due to privacy concerns. After the call, the experts on the call are available for direct follow-up about specific situations.

The other component of the calls is training. For this project, a team of experts spends about 30 minutes discussing issues requested by caseworkers around the state. The team includes a psychologist, psychiatrist, psychopharmacist, occupational therapist, social worker and member of the child protective services division. Some members are from Montana and others are nationally noted doctors.

The February call covered brain trauma in children. Other topics requested by caseworkers include things like the effects of trauma; attachment issues with children; how to help caregivers respond to a child's behavior and how to advocate for children's mental health treatment.

The University of Montana's Center for Children, Families and Workforce Development is also participating in the training sessions.

"Having a team of experts who are armed with the latest research is a tremendous asset," said Dr. Ryan Tolleson Knee, the center's director. "Using available web-based technology, we can support families and practitioners anywhere in the state no matter how remote."

Kitzenberg hopes to see improved relationships that result in better care for children.

"I think we are going to see an overall improvement with the communication between service providers, caregivers, our services to our children because there's specifics to treatment plans for



the children, an overall improvement in the quality of care and the connections we establish,” Kitzenberg said.

## Caseworkers get resources to better help children in trauma

*Associated Press*

Seattle Times

*Amy Beth Hanson*

Montana Child and Family Services caseworkers have a new resource to access expert advice in cases where children have experienced extreme trauma, Gov. Steve Bullock announced Thursday.

The Department of Public Health and Human Services is partnering with Billings Clinic and a program within the University of Montana School of Social Work to hold monthly video conferences offering education and feedback from national experts on child trauma. The training sessions include at least one case discussion.

Health department director Sheila Hogan said the pilot program will give caseworkers clinical insight and recommendations while allowing them to discuss the challenges they face and learn from each other to better help kids.

“Ultimately, the goal is to utilize the group’s collective expertise to make meaningful recommendations for caseworkers who work on these very complex cases daily,” Hogan said.

The collaboration is made possible by a video-based mentoring platform used by Billings Clinic to reach clinicians across the state on a variety of topics. UM’s Center for Children, Families and Workforce Development helps with an agenda, technical help and ongoing training and mentoring for caseworkers.

The effort will help caseworkers recognize and better understand the mental health impacts of the trauma the children have experienced, said Jeff Folsom with the UM Center.

Dr. Eric Arzubi, a child and adolescent psychiatrist with Billings Clinic, offered to provide Project ECHO’s video platform and access to national experts to the state agency, Hogan said.

“I’m just really grateful that we’re able to have this level of expertise in the child protection services system,” Hogan said.

The first 90-minute session was held in February, and more than 100 people joined the second session Thursday, she said.

"It's key that we understand clinically what might be happening with children who have experienced trauma," Mariela Herrera, a child and adolescent psychiatrist at Billings Clinic, said in a statement. "By sharing information and ideas we'll be able to provide valuable clinical insight that could help more children stay home and out of foster care, or help expedite getting those in foster care home more quickly. We may also be able to identify gaps in the child protection system."

The program's effectiveness will be evaluated after six months, Hogan said.

Project ECHO also offers video conferences for providers statewide on topics such as addictions treatment within the Department of Corrections, opioid addiction treatment and mental health treatment.

## **State Adds Training, Consultation Options for Foster Care Caseworkers (listen at link)**

<http://mtpo.org/post/state-adds-training-consultation-options-foster-care-caseworkers>

By CORIN CATES-CARNEY • MTPR

Caseworkers in Montana's foster care system are now receiving additional training and consultation on their work with extreme childhood trauma.

Sheila Hogan, director of the Department of Public Health and Human Services, says the new education program, which kicked off in February, will allow the state's child welfare workers to seek advice from health care professionals on some of their most challenging cases.

"I would hope that this would be an investment in our workers, they wouldn't feel as alone as they may feel in rural areas. As you know, we have workers around the state, and just based on Montana, they may not have access to this professional level of consultation," Hogan says.

The new program is part of the Extension for Community Healthcare Outcomes, a video-based mentoring platform used by the Billings Clinic, which is funding the state's participation in this program.

The Billings Clinic will work with DPHHS on this program for six months.

"So if this works for us, if it's a benefit to workers we'll see what we can do to try to continue (the program)," says Hogan.

Hogan says the hope is that by giving caseworkers more educational resources in monthly talks with psychiatrists, and trauma-informed occupational therapists, it will lower the number of kids in the state's foster care system.

Montana's child protection system has been weighed down in recent years by rising caseloads that often burnout caseworkers, leading to high staffing turnover.

There are about 4,000 kids in foster care in Montana. That number increased by more than 400 last year.